



Youth Sports Backgrounder

Sports: Addressing Physical Fitness and Much More

Organized youth sports are perhaps the largest youth “organization” within the United States. On average, 42 million children play sports each year. Still, approximately 62% of youth aged 9 to 13 do not participate in any organized physical activity during non-school hours, according to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention national study of approximately 4,500 children and parents. (Organized activities involve an organized group that has a coach, instructor or leader.) In addition nearly one-quarter of youth surveyed report not engaging in any free time physical activity. By enhancing the youth sports experience for kids with a community-wide effort focusing on physical and emotional development, that participation gap can close.

Youth sports have been recognized by researchers and lay persons alike as a vehicle to promote life skills and competencies. Sports let youth increase their self-esteem, develop an appreciation of health and fitness and become leaders within the community. Moreover, organized sports can be a safe and healthy alternative to risky behaviors during out-of-school time. Sports can provide a vehicle for regular physical activity that has been linked to helping adolescents develop healthy bodies by building and maintaining healthy bones and muscles, controlling body weight and body mass and reducing feelings of anxiety and depression. In another national survey, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 15% of youth ages 6 to 19 were overweight in 2000, and productive, structured sports experiences can address the sedentary lifestyle and physical inactivity of so many children.

Numerous research studies have found that sports participation during the childhood and teen years is linked to lifelong participation in physical fitness, which is a key behavior in the fight against obesity. For example in a recent longitudinal study by Perkins and his colleagues, American adolescents who participate in sports were found to be eight times more likely to participate in sports or fitness activities as adults than adolescents who did not participate in sport.

But beyond the potential physical benefits that can come from participating in sports, sports programs can have a positive emotional impact and be a fun and engaging way for children and youth to learn important life lessons about life. Researchers have found that participating in sports can foster in children and youth responsible social behaviors and greater academic success. The young sport enthusiast lists having fun, learning and improving skills, being with and making friends, belonging to a team, and being healthy and fit as reasons for playing sports. Participating on a team can also give children or youth the sense of belonging that they need. Moreover, a quality sports programs encourages the development of positive self-concept.

Yet of the more than 40 million plus youth that play sports in school or within the community, many (approximately 50 to 60%) will quit sports by age 12. Their reasons for dropping out include a lack of playing time, a dislike of the coach, too much competition and pressure, too many other activities to participate in and it is no longer fun. Basically, four of these reasons have to deal with the sports atmosphere becoming a negative experience for youth. Whether or not youth have positive experiences that appropriately foster their development depends in large part on the sports program atmosphere created by an organization, parents and coaches.

That atmosphere depends on how coaches, parents and youth handle themselves at practices and events, and also on the philosophy of the sports program organization. Furthermore, a lack of positive role models and excessive pressures to perform are additional factors that can create a negative sports environment. According to research, a win-at-all-costs atmosphere in a sports program can be harmful to developing youth. For instance, sports experiences that are highly competitive and/or aggressive have been linked to aggression and cheating behaviors in youth.

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Few children possess the talent to play competitive sports at the highest level. An overwhelming majority will not grow up to be professional athletes. Therefore the primary goals of youth sports are to foster the development of general physical competence and promote physical activity, fun, life skills, sportsmanship and good health. Youth sports that foster life skills are engaging kids in the development of their abilities to do life planning, be self-reliant and seek the resources of others when needed. To facilitate a positive sports atmosphere, youth sports programs need to focus on being effort-focused rather than emphasize winning at all costs. In other words, youth sports programs are meant to foster positive youth development, not foster victories.

In order to foster the development of youth through sports, scholars recommend utilizing a community youth development (CYD) framework. CYD involves creating opportunities for young people to connect to others, develop skills and utilize those skills to contribute to their communities that, in turn, increase their ability to succeed. Community youth development is an emerging framework that involves a shift away from concentrating on problems, instead concentrating on strengths, competencies and engagement in self-development and community development.

Community youth development comprises four parts: (1) The natural unfolding of the inherent human potential in relation to the challenges and supports of the physical and social environment; (2) A commitment to enabling all young people to achieve their potential—characterized by a positive, asset-building orientation that builds on strengths and also addresses specific problems faced by some youth (e.g., substance abuse, involvement in violence and premature parenthood); (3) Programs and organizations that employ a planned set of activities that foster a young person's growing capacity; and (4) Fully engaging youth as contributors in problem solving for the community through employment of the skills and competencies that they are developing. From a medical perspective, community youth development can be compared to the individual taking an active role in his/her health by getting an immunization, strengthening the body through physically appropriate exercise and dietary actions and shaping their environment to support the child in that endeavor.

The sports player also has some responsibility. They must be willing to listen and learn, to communicate their needs and to play with good sportsmanship and character. But the CYD framework indicates that youth have the right and responsibility to contribute to the community beyond the sports program. Therefore sports programs and the adults who organize and volunteer in them must provide meaningful opportunities for youth to contribute to the organization and community.

For example, try having two youth representatives at the organization's board meeting, where both youth have equal decision-making power as adult board members. Another example is to have youth teams host an activity day at a sports arena for a group of younger children from the local school or daycare center. A more basic example would be requiring that a parent and child volunteer at a different age group's game selling snacks or being the announcer. These examples build upon the key components of a CYD framework, including building skills, giving youth a sense of belonging and engaging youth as partners.

A program based on community youth development raises the specter and responsibility of adults. Community-based youth sports programs can foster positive youth development by creating developmentally intentional learning experiences. Opportunities are designed to build positive relationships among youth and adults and among youth and their peers. The knowledge, skills and competencies to be learned and developed are identified along with the learning methods involved. And the experience is tailored to the individual needs of the participating youth.

Thus, providing fun learning experiences through youth sports programming requires program staff and their organizations to be intentional in their planning and actions. Indeed when youth walk onto the field of play it is not what they see that is important, rather it is how they become engaged. Therefore program staff and organizations have an obligation to ensure that the setting is engaging and has the features that promote community youth development and positive character.



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